

Editors' response to Clarivate Analytics' decision to suppress Body Image from receiving a 2019 Impact Factor

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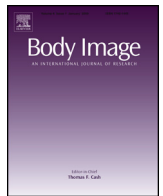
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Editors' response to Clarivate Analytics' decision to suppress *Body Image* from receiving a 2019 Impact Factor



1. Introduction to the issue

As the Editors of *Body Image*, we would like to alert our readership to the fact that Clarivate Analytics (the for-profit company that calculates the Impact Factors for Journal Citation Reports) has suppressed *Body Image* from receiving a 2019 Impact Factor due to a higher than typical number of self-citations. Clarivate's decision means that *Body Image* will still be listed in the Journal Citation Reports, but it will not have an Impact Factor for 2019. Clarivate will re-evaluate our 2020 performance, and either reissue an Impact Factor or continue the suppression. With the support of Elsevier, we are appealing Clarivate's decision for reasons specified in this editorial.

Implicit in the decision to suppress the journal's Impact Factor is the suggestion that editors have attempted to 'game' the system (e.g., by soliciting self-citations, preferentially accepting submissions with high self-citations, etc.). We share Clarivate's view that such practices are unethical, but **we completely reject any suggestion that we have engaged in gaming the journal's Impact Factor**. Specifically, we have not engaged in practices that are specifically aimed to increase the Impact Factor artificially by providing preferential treatment to manuscripts with larger number of self-citations, nor have we encouraged authors to increase self-citations within manuscripts with this in mind.

It is common during the review process that both editors and reviewers suggest references for authors to consider. These suggestions may help develop the article in various ways, such as building the rationale for their study or discussing their findings in the context of the extant literature. Acceptance of an article is never contingent on whether our suggested citations are incorporated. Our suggestions are not exclusive to the timespan that the Impact Factor is calculated on (in this case, only articles with 2017, 2018 dates). Our suggestions are not exclusive to *Body Image* articles. When an article is nearing the end of the review process and has been accepted pending formatting edits, we may remind authors to check to ensure that no recent research (from any journal) has been published since the review process began and to integrate relevant work when applicable and appropriate. (Of note, the authors decide what is applicable and appropriate.) We consider these practices to be wholly within the guidelines of good science and editing.

2. Why did the suppression happen?

The suppression did not occur due to an unethical practice. As editors, we uphold scientific integrity and ethics from submission

to publication. Below we offer several possible reasons why we had a higher self-citation percentage for 2019. Of note, these reasons likely interact.

- 1 We are a niche discipline, and *Body Image* is the *only* specialty journal for research relating to the construct of body image.

With body image research becoming increasingly prevalent, and with only one major outlet for this specialty research, it is understandable that many papers in the field of body image would cite other work relating to body image - which inevitably pass through the bottleneck of all body image research - *Body Image*. (In another relatedly niche field, eating disorder researchers have at least 6 journals in operation, minimizing the extent to which relevant references come from one journal.) The self-citation metric sounds like it would be much more relevant to generic journals in broad research areas, but it does not work well for specialist journals like *Body Image*. Furthermore, self-citation metrics represent a crude indicator for assessing a journal's practices. We are drawn to them because they provide a quick and simple way to rank journals, and many of our departments may use these metrics to gauge the quality of a candidate's work. Yet, these metrics are not without their problems, especially when applied to niche journals like *Body Image*, because they treat all journals as equivalent and fail to factor in the unique features and position of journals in specialty areas.

It is also important to keep in mind that there are journal impact metrics other than Clarivate's Impact Factor. For example, Elsevier has issued CiteScore. *Body Image*'s CiteScore remained similar in 2019 (6.5) compared to 2018 (6.8).

- 2 We have had a dramatic increase in submissions of high-quality work, which has led to more articles being published.

Last year saw a record number of submissions and acceptances. Each year, we see an increase in submissions by 100 or more (we are now averaging about 60 submissions per month). In 2018, we had 75 articles that were accepted. In 2019, we had 92 articles accepted. This is both an indication of how research on body image is flourishing, as well as the high standards applied during our review process.

But how does a higher number of articles relate to self-citations influencing the Impact Factor? The numerator of our Impact Factor of a given year (2019) contains the number of times 2019 *Body Image* articles cited 2017 and 2018 *Body Image* articles (i.e., self-citations) plus the number of times other 2019 journal articles cited

2017 and 2018 *Body Image* articles (i.e., other-citations). This number is then divided by the number of *Body Image* articles published in 2017 and 2018.

Self-citations are added rather than averaged. Therefore, with many more *Body Image* articles published in 2019, there are more opportunities for self-citations of 2017 and 2018 articles than years prior, when the number of articles published was lower. Unless all other journals that cite *Body Image* articles have a similar increase, the self-citation component of the numerator is going to increase, raising the percentage of self-citations.

3 We published many more systematic reviews and meta-analyses in 2019 than other years, such as the special issue devoted to the work of the Founding Editor-in-Chief of *Body Image*, Thomas F. Cash.

Reviews, due to their comprehensive nature of a current topic, will contain many citations to recent (as well as not so recent) work. Again, because *Body Image* is the main hub of body image research, authors of these reviews likely cite many recent articles from *Body Image*.

We continue to support submissions of systematic reviews and meta-analyses that synthesize findings across domains of body image, as they are a clear strength of our journal.

4 Unlike many other journals, we welcome and regularly publish articles containing body image scale adaptations (e.g., translations, modifications to fit another group such as children and athletes, etc.).

If a scale was originally published in *Body Image*, it follows that many subsequent scale adaptation studies will also be submitted to the journal. To take one example, there has been an upsurge in scale translations of the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2, which was originally published in *Body Image*) published in *Body Image* during the last 4 years. These adaptation papers mention other scale adaptations of the BAS-2, and thus they tend to contain more self-citations.

We view the dissemination of scale adaptations as a clear strength of our journal and an important service for the community of body image researchers. This way, these scales can be used to conduct body image research in diverse groups around the world.

5 Unlike many other journals, we do not have limitations to the number of pages, words, and/or references that authors can include in full-length articles.

Not limiting references, pages, and/or words allows for greater freedom to include more supporting references. Because *Body Image* is the only specialist journal publishing body image research, this freedom may result in more *Body Image*-specific self-citations. It is common for our full-length articles to include 50 or more references.

6 A new metric used by Clarivate.

Of note, Clarivate has indicated that they have a new metric for determining whether to suppress journals. This year, twice as many journals were suppressed compared to the previous year.

In 2015, our self-citation percentage (i.e., number of self-citations divided by total number of self-and other-citations) was 32.75%, in 2016 it was 40.4%, in 2017 it was 33.45%, and in 2018 it was 30.5%. These percentages were never flagged, and we were never sent an "editor expression of concern" letter. This year, it was 50.4%.

While these percentages, especially 2019, seem high and alarming, it is important to put them into perspective. We calculated the number of self-citations, on average, that would need to appear in an article to reach a 30%, 40%, and 50% self-citation rate (assuming a fixed number of other-citations). To reach 30%, each article would only need to include two self-citations on average, to reach 40%, each article would only need to include three self-citations on average, and to reach 50%, each article would only need to include four self-citations on average. (Please note that these are estimates based on last year's other-citations, as we are still awaiting the data to determine the exact number of self- and other-citations we had from 2019). In a reference list including 40–60 citations, four is only 6–10%.

3. Our plan

First, we are publicly pushing back against Clarivate – we are very uneasy about a private, for-profit company like Clarivate setting itself up as a self-appointed and unaccountable judge. We contacted Retraction Watch, who discussed our case within an article (see <https://retractionwatch.com/2020/07/13/stunned-very-confused-two-more-journals-push-back-against-impact-factor-suppression/>). We also contacted Clarivate directly, and we received a response indicating that they are reviewing our case. Elsevier is also looking into setting up a coordinated response of their journals that were suppressed (a total of 9).

Second, while the suppression is likely a reflection of *Body Image* being the only specialist journal in a growing research area, **we vow to not let the politics around Impact Factors influence the science we publish in *Body Image*, or the science used to support it** (i.e., the references). Ultimately, creative control of the references used to support authors' work must belong to authors themselves. **We re-commit to never gratuitously asking authors to refer to *Body Image* articles in their work.** Likewise, authors should know that they will not be penalized for referring to *Body Image* citations in their work.

Third, while Clarivate does not release the exact metric that they use to determine whether a journal is suppressed, we commit to looking at the data they do provide us to help us in moving forward. We are committed to restoring our Impact Factor and remaining in good standing from that point on.

4. Conclusion

We believe that our self-citation percentage is likely a reflection of *Body Image* being the only specialist journal in a rapidly growing research area. Furthermore, features of our journal (e.g., publishing body image scale adaptations, publishing articles with no limitations on reference count) may prompt a higher than typical number of self-citations.

We hope that this news does not discourage you, your lab, your students, and your collaborators from submitting to *Body Image*, reviewing *Body Image* articles, and holding the journal in high regard. In the words of one of us:

In my own experience, *Body Image* is simply the best fit for my research, and there is no other journal like it. I also know that, when I publish in *Body Image*, my research will be seen and read by other scholars in our field. In fact, when I have tried to publish elsewhere, to diversify my CV, I am often advised by other journal editors to submit to *Body Image*, instead! Further, in my experience, when it comes to writing manuscripts, many of my citations will come from *Body Image* because this is simply the best source of high-quality research in our field. To me, it makes complete sense, and I am baffled as to why we would be punished for this.

We underscore how much we appreciate you, our reviewers and authors, for all the work that you have done and all that you will continue to do to make *Body Image* successful. We reiterate that we are committed to advancing research relating to body image, restoring our Impact Factor, and reassuring our field's valued scientists that the impact and reach of your work will not be impacted by this algorithmic anomaly relating to the Impact Factor metrics.

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